

**A PROTEST AGAINST SOCIAL INJUSTICE IN VICTOR HUGO'S *LES MISERABLES* (1862): A MARXIST CRITICISM**



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**ABSTRACT**

The aim of this research is to analyze how a protest against social injustice and its causes are expressed in the novel using marxist criticism. This research is qualitative research. Technique of analyzing data is descriptive analysis. The techniques of collecting data are (1) Reading the novel of *Les Miserables*, (2) Identifying the topic of the novel, (3) Determining the character that will be analyzed, (4) Taking notes of important thing both of primary and secondary data source, (5) Reading some related books to find out the theory, and (6) Determining the issues of the novel. Based on the marxist criticism, it can be concluded that the writer of the novel protests the social justice that happened in France in the mid of nineteenth century. Here the writer of the novel wants a revolution to get social justice in the society.

**Key word : Protest against social injustice, Marxist criticism, Les Miserables**

## A. Introduction

The novel of *Les Misérables* is a French novel. It is written by Victor Hugo. The first novel was published in 1862 by A.Lacroix Verboeckhoven & cie. It becomes one of the greatest novels of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The novel has been translated into 9 languages. So it has become one of the best-selling books in history. In English edition, the novel was published by Penguin Classic. The novel is divided into five volumes, each volume is divided into several books, and subdivided into chapters, the novel consists of 48 books and 365 chapters. Each chapter is relatively short, it has only a few pages. The novel contains many subplots. The novel is very long because it has approximately 1,500 pages in English language editions, and 1900 pages in French. The novel elaborates about the history and the architecture of French, politics, moral philosophy, antimonarchism, justice, religion, and the romantic of love. *Les Misérables* has been popularized through a lot of adaptations. They are through the stage, television, and film.

Victor Marie Hugo was born on 26 February 1802. He is a French poet, novelist, and dramatist. He becomes one of the greatest and best known as French writers. He was known as the writer of novels *Les Misérables*, 1862, and *Notre-Dame de Paris*, 1831 (known in English as *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame*). Victor Hugo is also a human rights activist. Victor Hugo was the third and the last son of Joseph Leopold Sigisbert Hugo and Sophie Trebuchet. He had two siblings Abel Joseph Hugo and Eugene Hugo. His father, Joseph was an atheist republican and an influential officer in the army of Napoleon. While his mother Sophie was a staunch Catholic Royalist. The author died on 22 May 1885, at the age of 83.

The story of the novel is about Jean Valjean who is released from prison, and through the kindness of Mr. Myriel, he becomes a new man who kind, wise, and generous. In his life, he meets a woman, Fantine. She becomes a prostitute. A small incident takes place in the streets, and Fantine is arrested by Javert. Valjean, who has become known as Mayor Madeleine, forces Javert to release her and takes her into his house when he hears her story. Fantine is a poor woman, she never meets her child again, even though Valjean had promised to get the child. Meanwhile, another man has been arrested because he is considered as Valjean. But on the other day, Mr. Madeleine talks in the court that he was an original Valjean. He spends his time in prison, he works in a ship. Eventually he escapes again and retrieves Cosette from the evil Thenardiers whom Fantine had trusted to take care of the child. Then begins 10 years of hiding, moving from place to place,

always staying just ahead of Javert. Seven or eight happy years are spent in a convent where Valjean works with the gardener and Cosette attends a girls' school. Then Cosette married Marius who is a college student who has been raised by his grandfather for supporting Napoleon. Javert always seeks Valjean to be arrested. Once the time Javert is dead, it means that Cosette, Valjean, and Marius become happy family. Then Valjean dies in the end.

The good responses from the readers of the novel are first, according to Tim, a student in the California (2005) he says that he loves the richness of the story, because he can feel the sadness, happiness and, anger by reading the novel like when he reads the poetry. Second, according to Lauren Beck, a housewife in Los Angeles (2004), she says that the plot is incredible, and the characters are so real and varying in personalities. Third, according to Bhagwad, a student in the USA (2009), he says that the book is one the greatest book that he has ever read and the book will leave the reader feeling sad, peaceful, thoughtful, and more sensitive.

The critical response from the market is when *Les Misérables* is published, a lot of French writers comment negatively about the novel. But when the novel is there in French bookshop, it making long lines and traffic jams just to buy the novel. The novel can be sold out until 48,000 copies in the first day. The novel *Les Misérables* also has many contradictions. Conservatives feared the social impact of the novel, and the Vatican banned it for several years. The French newspaper *The Constitutional* wrote that if the ideas of the novel were acknowledged, "no part of the social order would remain standing."

The interesting thing about this novel is *Les Miserables* becomes one of the best novels along of 19<sup>th</sup> century. The chronology of this novel is written based on the real condition in that time. The writer writes this novel about people and for people, this novel also makes the government in that time to change the role for social injustice. The novel also has been changed into a movie. It gets some awards from its movie "*Les Miserables*". Firstly, in 1987 *Les Miserables* won Tony award for categories as follows Best Musical, Best Book of a Musical, Best Original Score, Best Performance by a Featured Actor in a Musical, Best Performance by a Featured Actress in a Musical, Best Direction of a Musical, Best Scenic Design, Best Lighting Design. Secondly, in the same year, *Les Miserables* won Drama Desk Award for categories as follows Outstanding Actor in a Musical, Outstanding Orchestrations, Outstanding Music, Outstanding Set Design. In 1985, Laurence Oliver award for category Best Actress in a Musical and the

last in 2012, *Les Miserables* also won the Laurence Olivier award for category Audience Award for Most Popular Show.

The reason why this researcher wants to analyze this novel is the first, the writer wants to know the character and characterization of Valjean who becomes the main character in the novel. The second is, the researcher wants to know the condition and situation at the revolution France period. At that time, the people are poor, hunger, and oppressive. The third reason is the style of the writer. The writer writes the story of the novel with poem and letter of Victor Hugo as evidence and complement of the novel that has happy ending story. The fourth reason is the novel teaches us about the patriotism, religion, and fondness in the society. It tells about the man that fights against the social injustice in French Revolution.

Considering the explanation above, the researcher believes that it is necessary to conduct an analysis related with this problem. To conduct this analysis the writer will use Marxist approach and constructs the title: **A PROTEST AGAINST SOCIAL INJUSTICE IN VICTOR HUGO'S *LES MISERABLES* (1862): A MARXIST CRITICISM.**

## **B. Research Method**

In this research, the researcher uses qualitative research. There are some steps to conduct the research. The first is determining the type of the study. The second step is determining the object of the study. The next is determining data and data source. The fourth step is determining technique of data collection, and the last step is determining technique of data analysis. The object of the study is a protest against social injustice in Victor Hugo's *Les Miserables* (1862). It is analyzed by using marxist criticism.

There are two data sources which are needed to conduct this research. They are primary data sources and secondary data sources. The primary data source is *Les Miserables* novel (1862) in English edition by Victor Hugo, while the secondary data source consist of material about social injustice books which deals with the research.

The technique of analyzing data is descriptive analysis. It concerns with the contain of the novel on protesting against social injustice reflected Victor Hugo's *Les Miserables*.

The techniques of collecting data are reading novel and note taking, the steps are: (1) Reading the novel of *Les Miserables*, (2) Identifying the topic of the novel, (3)

Determining the characters that will be analyzed, (4) Taking note of important thing both primary and secondary data source, (5) Reading some related books to find out the theory, (6) Determining the issues of the novel.

### **C. Findings and Discussion**

The researcher gets some research finding in analyzing *Les Miserables* novel. Each finding has some cases to be discussed. After they have examined, all of components will get back together in a schematic manner in the discussion.

#### **1. Finding**

In analyzing *Les Miserables* novel, the researcher gets some findings. There are some social historical background of French society in the mid of nineteenth century.

##### **a. Dialectical Materialism**

In dialectical materialism, the history of society consists of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis. Thesis is the first idea, concept or argument deals with the problem, sometimes peoples accept or maybe denying a thesis. They accept them as an argument, in the contrary, they denying them maybe as confirmation (the righting as supplement). Thesis and antithesis will formulate synthesis.

The novel *Les Miserables* expresses the process of dialectical materialism. The struggle of Victor Hugo to describes the different of high class and the lower class. Thesis comes when the writer describes the condition of society in France when the revolution happened in nineteen century. First, thesis comes when the revolution happened in 1815 in Dygne, France. It is described in the minor character in *Les Miserables* novel, Myriel's life.

“In the 1815 Monseigneur Charles-Francois-Bienvenu Myriel was Bishop of Digne. Then had come the revolution, and in the rush of those events the decimated and persecuted parliamentary families had been scattered. Charles Myriel emigrated to Italy, and here his wife died of the chest complaint that had long afflicted her. (LM; p: 19).

The bourgeoisie lives in the luxurious house and has big gardens with many kinds of flowers and trees. It also has expensive goods.

“Everything in the palace was on the grand scale, the bishop's personal apartments, the drawing-rooms and bedrooms, the broad courtyard flanked by arcades in the old Florentine manner and the gardens planted with splendid trees. The dining-room was a long and magnificent gallery on the ground floor, giving on to the garden.” (LM; p: 21).

On the other hand, the public place for the law worker is described with poor condition. "The hospital was a narrow, two-storeyed house with a small garden." (LM; p: 21).

Antithesis comes when the minor character Monseigneur Myriel lives with poor condition. He lives in hospital, he hasn't house.

"M. Myriel had no private means; his family had been ruined by the revolution. His sister's annuity of five hundred francs had sufficed for their personal needs during his curacy. As bishop he received a stipend of fifteen thousand francs. On the day of his removal to the hospital he laid down, once and for all, how this money was to be used." (LM; p: 22).

Finally, synthesis comes to formulate thesis and antithesis. In the process, the writer wants to equalize social condition to get equality.

"Wealthy penitents and the devout ladies of Digne had more than once subscribed funds for providing the oratory with a handsome new altar. The bishop took the money and gave it to the poor. 'The soul of an unfortunate who thanks God for consolation,' he said, 'is the best of altars.'" (LM; p: 36).

## **b. Historical Materialism**

The definition of historical materialism can be reflected in the story of *Les Misérables*. The character is divided into two groups, they are bourgeoisie and low worker. The bourgeoisie come from high class and have a means of production to get money. They have power and authority to exploit the low worker. While, the low worker is the poor, they have no money and power. They have to sell their skill to earn money to fulfill their needs.

The novel presents the major character, Jean Valjean as a low worker who works hardly to fulfill the need of his family. He sells their skill to get achievement nevertheless he gets little payment.

"His work as a tree-pruner brought him twenty four sous a day during the season and at other times he worked as a harvester, cattleman, or at any other form of casual labour. He did what he could, and his sister also worked, but the seven children were a great burden. They were a sad little group, engulfed in poverty and always on the verge of destitution. And then came a particularly house. Literally no bread and seven children." (LM; p: 93).

When Jean Valjean feels sad with his payment from his job, he decides to steal the bread. He gets punishment in prison. After he escapes from the prison, he wants to repair his image. He changes his name into Madeleine because he wants to get a lot of money. "I changed my name, I grew rich and become mayor; I sought to reinstate myself in the ranks of honest men." (LM; p:256). Through changing his



name, Jean Valjean can help low worker if they need job and gives his money for poor people. He does it because he wants to camouflage his identity and get a lot money.

The other major character who describes historical materialism is Thenardier and Javert. Thenardier has an inn. Thenardier has a foster child, her name is Cosette. In front of Jean Valjean and society, Thenardier feels happy and proud with Cosette. Actually, he feels hate to her and always makes her become housekeeper in his house. The purpose of his act is in order to get money from Cosette's mother every month. "I should miss her too much. I've known her since she was a baby. It is true that she costs money and that she has her faults; it is true that we are not rich, and that I had to pay more than four hundred francs for medicine for one of her illnesses." (LM; p: 375). In here, Fantine also is described as a low worker who works in factory hardly to get achievement to fulfill the request of Thenardiers. "The terrible winter season, which turns the rain from Heaven and the hearts of men to stone! Fantine's creditors were harassing her. She could not earn enough and her debts grew. The Thenardiers bombarded her with letters, heartrending in tone and ominous in their exactions. They wrote to say that Cosette was obliged to go almost naked in the cold and that at least ten francs were needed to buy her a wollen dress." (LM; p: 176).

Javert is a policeman in France who always hunts Jean Valjean everywhere. Javert has a purpose to caught Jean Valjean. Its purpose is to build the justice and remove the crime. Actually, he has the other means. He wants to get achievements from the society and get the increasing of position in Police Department.

"Javert was summoned to Paris to assist in the search for Jean Valjean and had played an important part in his recapture. His zeal and energy on that occasion attracted the notice of M. Chapouillet who had interested himself in Javert in the past, had him transferred from Montreuil-sur-mer to Paris, where he rendered useful and, inappropriate though the word may appear in connection with such a calling, honorable service." (LM; p: 418).

Thus, all of above evidences show that materialistic becomes a part of human's story and creates a polarization in the society.

### **c. Alienation**

The power and authority from society make the major character alienated and separated from his environment. Alienation happens because the major character is

alienated by the bourgeoisie. It can be proven when Jean Valjean escapes from the prison, he gets money from his job in ship that not suitable with real amount calculate during nineteen years in the prison. He should get one hundred and seventy one francs but he only gets one hundred and nine francs and fifteen sous.

“When at the time of his leaving prison Jean Valjean heard the words, ‘You are free,’ the moment had seemed blinding and unbelievable, as though he were suddenly pierced by a shaft of light, the true lights of living men. He had calculated that his savings during his imprisonment would amount to one hundred and seventy one francs. It must be said in fairness that he had omitted to allow for Sundays and feast days, days of enforced rest which reduced this total by about twenty four francs. But, there had been other deductions conforming to prison regulations, and the sum he received was one hundred and nine francs and fifteen sous.” (LM; p: 103).

When he leaves the prison, he gets yellow ticket as sign that he is not convict again. Then he wants to get job. He shows the yellow ticket to the foreman in factory. After that he can work in factory. He should get thirty sous a day for that work. But when he asked his payment for the foreman, Jean Valjean only gets twenty five sous.

“While he was at work a passing gendarme noticed him and asked to see his papers. He had to show the yellow ticket, after which he went back to work. Earlier he had asked one of the other men the rate of pay for the day and had been told that it was thirty sous. In the evening, since he was obliged to move on next morning, he went to the foreman and asked for his wage. Without saying anything the man handed him twenty five sous, and said when he protested, ‘That’s good enough for you.’ (LM; p: 104).

Based on the explanation above. It can be conclude that there is alienation between the ex-convict and bourgeoisie. The bourgeoisie gets more benefit from his act.

#### **d. Class Struggle**

Hartisekar and Markonina (2001: 35) explain that “Class struggle focuses on the struggle of the oppressed class against the oppressor.” In other words, it may focus on the way to face the clash of clash and face the oppression itself. One basic reason of this part is economic because of economic determinism make the level of social class. The definition of class struggle focuses on the struggle of the oppressed class or low class against the oppressor or high class in this novel.

In this novel, Jean Valjean is described as the low level worker. Jean lives with his sister and his seven nephews. His sister does not work while she has seven

children. He gets social injustice in his life. Firstly, he is hate to his environment because they do not care to him and his family when he is hungry and poor.

“He came home tired after work and ate his supper in silence. His sister, Mother Jeanne, would often take the best bits out of his bowl, the scrap of meat or whatever it might be, to give to one of the children. Seated with his head bowed and the long hair hiding his eyes, he would take no notice of this but would go on eating as though nothing had happened.” (LM; p: 92).

To protest against social injustice, he tries to steal the bread in shop bakery to feed his siter and seven nephews, “One Sunday night when Maubert Isabeau the baker in Faverolles was getting ready for bed, he heard a sound of shattered glass from his barred shop window. The hand grasped a loaf and the thief made off at a run, the thief was Jean Valjean.” (LM; p: 93).

To protest against social injustice in his life, once more again, he tries to steal the money from Petit Gervais and steals the silver from Monseigneur Myriel.”Where is the silver Monseigneur, it has been stolen! That man who came last night!” (LM; p: 109). “Give me back my forty sous, if you please. Will you please move your foot?” (LM; p: 113).

In the explanation above, there is struggle or protest against social injustice. It can be found from the action of Jean Valjean after he gets social injustice.

#### **e. Revolution**

Revolution is the result of class struggle. It is violence plus political change that brings about a fall or a change a regime that is the bourgeoisie. Revolution in this story happens when Marius joins in ABC society to against the social injustice in Paris.

“The next day he took Marius to the Café Musain. Murmuring with a smile, ‘I must introduce you to the revolution,’ he led him into the back room used by the ABC Society and presented him to his friends with the single word, ‘A novice.’ (LM; p: 570).

In here ABC Society is the community of the men who against the government in that time. Its purpose is against social injustice that be done by the member of government.”The ostensible purpose of the ABC Society was the education of children, but its real purpose was the elevation of men.” (LM; p: 555).

In fact, Revolution is possible change to go to the classless society, so there is a new structure social class arrangement in the society. It can be said that after

Marius and all of his friends in the ABC Society make a revolution in Paris. In the end, the struggle of that community is not successful. It is proven by the all members of ABC Society are dead except Marius.

“Within a few minutes the soldiers had driven out the last of the rebels sheltering at the top of the house. They fired through a wooden lattice into the attic. There was fighting under the roof and bodies were flung out of windows, some of them still living. Two sappers who were trying to set the overturned omnibus upright were killed by carbine-shots from the attic. A man in a smock was flung out of it with a bayonet-thrust in his belly and lay groaning on the ground. The soldier began to search the surrounding houses and pursue the fugitives.” (LM; p: 1058).

## 2. Discussion

Through the novel *Les Misérables*, Victor Hugo gives emphasizes on the social condition of France in the mid of nineteenth century, which is indicated by the grouping class into bourgeoisies and low worker. Here the low worker is placed in lower class, which is not satisfied with the economic and social condition. They want to make protest to against social injustice. Thus, the purpose of the protest from the major character is to change his life into better life and his environment more justice.

Hugo expresses his criticism about the social and economic condition by creating the central character and building the plot. It can be seen from the plot, that Jean Valjean as a gardener and from a working class family who has not the money to buy the food for his family. Then, he steals the bread, money and silver.

Based on Hugo's criticism, the social stratification in economic aspect is a main source of the conflict in society at that time. The labor feels that there is big differentiation between labor and capital. The low worker feels downtrodden with bourgeoisie because low worker has worked hard but the low worker only get a few payment.

In this novel, Hugo reflects that the labor as the lower class is an oppressed group. It can be seen from the plot of the story. The oppressed in here is society. So the one of the bourgeoisie wants to revolt their condition into proper life, no pressure from the other group, and no high different of stratification in all aspect of life.

Based on the analysis above, it is evident to state that the structural elements of *Les Misérables* are matched with the main idea of Victor Hugo viewed from Marxist criticism.

## D. Conclusion

First, based on the structural analysis of *Les Misérables* novel, it can be concluded that Victor Hugo wants to deliver the message to the reader that “True justice is impossible without social justice”. To deliver the message, Hugo creates the character named Jean Valjean who is from low worker who gets social injustice. Because he becomes a thief, Jean Valjean changes his identity becomes Madeleine to help poor people. Although, in the end, all of society know that he is Jean Valjean, not Madeleine. Then, the author joins other structural elements, such as: characterization, plot, setting, point of view, theme, style and relates each other to make whole unity.

Second, based on the Marxist analysis, it can be inferred that Victor Hugo protests against the social injustice that happened in France in the mid of nineteenth century. Here Victor Hugo wants a revolution to get social justice in the society.

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